

## The Opera Houses of Iowa

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Wilder and Robyn Hansen's compilation "A Glossary of Outdoor Games"—advance Grover's agenda and show the historical complexity of play and leisure, their social function, and how they embody and transform class, gender, and ethnicity.

One of the book's major contributions is to remind readers of the "leisure revolution" that occurred during the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, and of the time when leisure competed with work for the attention of the nation. It is refreshing to be reminded that work has not always been the Thing-for-itself, but was once primarily a means to other ends—a way to get necessities and then to get leisure to do "better" and "higher" things.

*The Opera Houses of Iowa*, by George D. Glenn and Richard L. Poole. Ames: Iowa State University Press, 1993. xiv, 190 pp. Illustrations, references, appendix, bibliography, index. \$24.95 cloth.

REVIEWED BY TRACY A. CUNNING, LOUIS BERGER & ASSOCIATES

*The Opera Houses of Iowa* is the latest in a series of works devoted to this once ubiquitous building type, and is the culmination of George Glenn and Richard Poole's twelve-year study of the history of theater in Iowa. To document the state's opera houses, whether standing or long gone, they compiled information from mail questionnaires, on-site inspection, oral informants, and miscellaneous published and unpublished histories.

In a field of history so dominated by big-city theaters and stars of the stage and screen, Glenn and Poole underscore the opera house's importance in the cultural life of small and medium-sized Iowa communities between 1850 and 1915. Except in the most populous Iowa cities, the opera house was not only a theater but also a general entertainment facility where one could attend dramatic shows, concerts, dances, lectures, political rallies, school graduations, athletic events, and eventually motion picture shows. The multipurpose nature of the opera house and the variety of its physical form constitute the basic message of this work, one that undoubtedly has parallels in other midwestern states.

*The Opera Houses of Iowa* is divided into two parts. The first covers the physical forms of Iowa opera houses; the scenery, performers, and performances commonly associated with them; and, very briefly, the opera house as community gathering place. The second part, the lion's share of the book, is a catalog of more than three hundred opera houses known to have existed in the state. It is an alphabetical listing by town, including dimensions of the building and auditorium,

information on the decoration and organization of space within the building, and details of stage equipment and extant scenery. Although the entries vary in detail according to available information, it is here that the breadth of the authors' effort is most apparent.

Glenn and Poole emphasize the physical characteristics of the buildings, and present a new typology by which to view them. Their typology is based on form and function: single-story opera houses, upper-story opera houses, stage-oriented upper-floor opera houses, and grand opera houses. Previous typologies stressed the evolution over time from simple, one-story "utility" halls to opulent, multitiered grand opera houses. But Glenn and Poole found that simple ground-floor and upper-floor halls were constructed throughout the period 1850-1915, and they concluded that there is no clear evolutionary pattern in opera house development.

Glenn and Poole's flexible classification system acknowledges the variety of theatrical and architectural features found in opera houses, and corrects the rigid, chronological evolution of earlier typologies, but it is still problematic because it neglects time. Using a sample drawn from Glenn and Poole's data, and supplementing it with additional sources, I concluded that opera houses *did* change over time ("Footlights in Farm Country: Iowa Opera Houses, 1835-1940," Multiple Property Document, State Historical Society of Iowa, 1992). There is a clear trend from upper-floor theaters to ground-floor theaters, and a trend toward noncombustible construction materials from about 1860 to about 1920. Changes in the shape, appearance, geographical distribution, and attendance of opera houses in the state are linked to changes in transportation, economics, demography, and building technology. Glenn and Poole's typology does not adequately reflect these changes. By linking opera houses with Iowa history, we may discover the reasons for their changing appearance, and the relationships among the types.

Glenn and Poole could have developed a more extensive historical context for opera houses by investigating a number of additional sources. Chief among these are Sanborn fire insurance maps, a valuable source for physical data on buildings in most Iowa towns. They also overlooked several master's theses from Iowa institutions and recent articles on frontier theater published in theater history journals.

In *The Opera Houses of Iowa* Glenn and Poole make a laudable attempt to illuminate the meaning of these multipurpose entertainment facilities euphemistically called opera houses. They provide a good introduction and reference guide to Iowa opera houses, but those with more probing questions may find their work lacking. Flaws aside, *The Opera Houses of Iowa* helps fill a void in the history of American theater and popular culture.

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